Mishpatim

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Cantillation: Some Observations - Part 2

William Gewirtz, a former CTO of AT&T Business, is a consultant in the technology and communications sector.

Introduction

Part 1 of this essay briefly introduced the trop, followed by a study of its significance in some local contexts, concluding with some evidence of trop’s rabbinic origin. Part 2 looks at trop in its global context, structuring the two parts of most pesukim, until and after the word containing an etnahta. The process by which the trop operates demonstrates its recursive nature, providing a very early example of recursion in a musical context.

Trop contains 4 levels of separators (mafsikim) and a single set of connectors (meshartim). All trop symbols are either separators or connectors. The first level separators (often referred to as keisarim, Caesars) are the sof pesuk, which ends the sentence, and the etnahta, which divides the pesuk into two parts, analogous to a semi-colon. Both parts of the sentence, before and after the etnahta, are treated identically by the rules of trop. The second level of separators (often referred to as melakhim, kings), the zakeif katan, zakeif gadol, segol, shalshelet and tipha, define the major structure of the pesuk. Pashta, revi’, and tevir, an additional level lower, are common third level separators, while darga, pazeir, and telisha gedolah are common fourth level separators.

Munah, merha, mahapah, and kadma are common connectors; there should not be an apparent pause between the reading of words where they appear and the following word.

Trop identifies the pesuk’s structure both at a global / macro level (the entire pesuk, or its two components divided by the etnahta) and at a local / micro level (each individual phrase).

Trop is Recursive

Recursion is primarily a mathematical notion which operates on an entity, dividing that entity into parts where at least one part is operated on by the identical process. One can think of this as an arbitrary number of Russian matryoshka (often called Babushka) dolls, each embedded in another.

In a brilliant book, Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid, Douglas Hofstadter shows that recursion, which in mathematics was brought to its ultimate use by Kurt Gödel, was also present in painting (such as by Escher) and music (such as by Bach). In music, recursion involves a (completely or partially) identical pattern that repeats (iteratively) within a pattern. Recursion was present in the trop 1,000 years before its occurrence in Bach’s music, albeit with trop’s much less intricate musical scope.

Trop’s global operation

Except for short pesukim, the vast majority of pesukim contain one etnahta that divides the pesuk into its two principal parts. Going forward, we refer to either a short pesuk or to either of the two parts of a longer pesuk as an initial segment. Trop operates independently on each individual segment. Note that all initial segments end with a first level mafsik, either a sof pesuk or an etnahta. The lower level mafsikim (listed above) further divide the pesuk into smaller segments.

Trop’s operation on a segment is governed by the following rules:

1. Read the segment (from right to left) until the first mafsik one level lower than the mafsik on which the segment ends is encountered.

2. If such a mafsik is encountered, divide the segment into two, with the mafsik acting as the separator. Those two segments are then operated on again by the rule.

3. If a mafsik one level lower is not found, the segment is not further divisible, and no further operation is performed.

Since all pesukim are of finite length, part 3 of the rule will eventually occur either because

- the mafsik at the end of the segment is at level 4 (and there are no mafsikim of a lower level), or
- even though the segment ends with a mafsik of levels 1, 2, or 3, no mafsik one level lower is present.

One of the fundamental rules of trop forbids the presence of a mafsik of lower level than the level being sought. For example, if a segment ends with a second level mafsik and there is no third level mafsik earlier in the segment, one can be certain that a fourth level mafsik will also not be present.

1 Of the 5,853 pesukim in the Torah only 372 do not contain an etnahta; see https://quantifiedcantillation.nl/.
When operating with the rules of *trop* on any segment, the rule will divide that segment into two parts, providing it finds a *mafsik* one level lower; the part to the right ends on the word containing the *mafsik*, and the part to the left is the remainder of the original segment. This pattern repeats on any segment, regardless of length.\(^2\) The rule’s identical repetition on both segments demonstrates its recursiveness.\(^3\)

Consider the second *pasuk* in Ki Tavo (Deuteronomy 26:2). The first part of the *pasuk*

\[\text{לָּךְ וְַ֣הַלָּכְתָּ֙} \text{אֲלֵ֣י הָּמָָ֗קוּם} \text{וְַ֣יָּדָּ֙ עַל־כִֵׁ֣סָּהּ} \text{רַאִֽי} \text{וְַ֣מָּשְּמְּמִֽנְי} \text{רַאִֽי} \text{רַאִֽי}
\]

encounters its first *melekh*, a *tipha*, on the word שֵָם. Note that this symbol accurately divides the first section into two parts; the first part tells us what should be taken, and the second part tells us where it should be placed.

The second part of the *pasuk*,

\[\text{הָּ֙רָּ֣צְדִּ֑קִָׁ} \text{אֱלֹהֵ֥יךְ נֹתֵֵ֥ן} \text{כֵֵ֥י־עַל־כֵֵ֥ן} \text{לָָ֖ך} \text{לְהֵָֽה} \text{וְלָָ֖ךְ וְַ֣הַלָּכְתָּ֙} \text{אָלֵ֣י הָּמָָ֗קוּם} \text{וְַ֣יָּדָּ֙ עַל־כִֵׁ֣סָּהּ} \text{רַאִֽי}
\]

encounters its first *melekh*, a *zakeif katan*, on the word מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר. The *pasuk* tells us to travel to the place, and then provides a further description of the place.

The segment comprising the second half of the *pasuk* succinctly illustrates a critical detail that can cause some confusion when separating a *pasuk* into its constituent parts. Consider the two subdivisions of this half-*pasuk*, one up to and including the word מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר and one after it. The second subdivision can be further divided by a *second level mafsik*, the *zakeif katan* on the word מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר. However, the first subdivision is further divided by a *third level mafsik*, the *pashta* on the word שֵָֽם. Note that it is not the level of a *mafsik*, but its role in the *trop*’s division of a segment, that determines a *pasuk*’s syntax.

**Syntax only, not semantics**

As noted in Part 1, since *trop* provides only syntax, it can

1. provide likely support for a specific interpretation or
2. be conclusively inconsistent with a specific interpretation.

The following examples, more complex than those covered in Part 1, all contain a separator / connector where the other might be expected, and therefore support dramatically different interpretations.

Consider the semantically ambiguous reply that occurs when a pregnant Tamar confronts Yehudah (Genesis 38:26). Yehudah responds:

\[\text{בִּנְי} \text{לאָֽרֵנְתִּימִֽה} \text{לֱשנָּל} \text{כִיּוֹלֶּֽתְךָ֛ מְפַּקְלִים} \text{יֵאָֽרְמַּר} \text{יֵאָֽרְמַּר} \text{יֵאָֽרְמַּר}
\]

The first part of the *pasuk* ends on the word מְפַּקְלִים, which contains a *zakeif katan*. The word מְפַּקְלִים has a *munaḥ*, linking it to the word מְפַּקְלִים. The *trop* is seemingly in accordance with the interpretation given by those such as Rashbam where Yehudah admits that “she is more righteous than I.” On the other hand, the *trop* is inconsistent with an alternative interpretation, “she is righteous; the child is mine,” which is the interpretation given by Onkelos, Rashi, and others. For that interpretation to be tenable, the word מְפַּקְלִים would require a *mafsik*.

Often the syntax can provide (nearly) equal support for two alternative interpretations. Consider the brief *pasuk* in Genesis (49:18) with which Yaakov ends his *berakah* to Dan:

\[\text{יְהוּדָָ֗ה} \text{לָָ֖ךְ} \text{מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר} \text{וּֽלְכָּֽה} \text{לָָ֖ךְ} \text{לְהֵָֽה} \text{וְַ֣הַלָּכְתָּ֙} \text{אָלֵ֣י הָּמָָ֗קוּם} \text{וְַ֣יָּדָּ֙ עַל־כִֵׁ֣סָּהּ} \text{רַאִֽי}
\]

An interpretation like: “I await for Your deliverance, O Lord,” as translated by JPS, is inconsistent with the *trop*. Such an explanation would require placing the *tipha* one word further, at יְהוּדָָ֗ה. This interpretation is also hard to reconcile with the context, unless God’s deliverance is awaited not on behalf of Yaakov but on behalf of Dan. However, as written, the *trop* is consistent with various semantic alternatives. The sentence can mean “For *deliverance by You*, I have prayed to the Lord,” without stating explicitly for whom deliverance is prayed for. Again, the context more likely implies that Yaakov is praying for Dan’s (or his descendant’s) deliverance. Alternatively, directly addressing Dan, Yaakov tells him that he prays to the Lord for his *deliverance*. This explanation is given by Rashbam.\(^4\)

On occasion, dramatically different semantic interpretations are both possible given the *trop*. In both of the following *pesukim* the *trop* is consistent with either interpretation. First let’s consider Exodus 8:19:

\[\text{מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר} \text{לָָ֖ךְ וְַ֣הַלָּכְתָּ֙} \text{אָלֵ֣י הָּמָָ֗קוּם} \text{וְַ֣יָּדָּ֙ עַל־כִֵׁ֣סָּהּ} \text{רַאִֽי}
\]

Does מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר mean a separation or a salvation? Both interpretations likely agree that God will create a *separation* between the Israelites, who will receive *salvation*, and the Egyptians, who will be *afflicted*. The argument is about the meaning of the word מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר, either a separation or a salvation, making one word explicit and the other implied. Onkelos interprets מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר as salvation, more consistent with its typical meaning; most commentators prefer separation, more consistent with the context of this *pasuk*.

Next, let’s look at Exodus 17:16:

\[\text{אִפְּרֵ֥ים יְֽלִֽדְךָ} \text{לָָ֖ךְ וַּֽלְכָּֽה} \text{לָָ֖ךְ} \text{לְהֵָֽה} \text{וְַ֣הַלָּכְתָּ֙} \text{אָלֵ֣י הָּמָָ֗קוּם} \text{וְַ֣יָּדָּ֙ עַל־כִֵׁ֣סָּהּ} \text{רַאִֽי}
\]

Are we taking an oath, or referring to a time when there is a monarchy? The term מֵֵֽאַרְצְךָ֛ אֲשֶׁ֨ר is ambiguous. It could mean that one’s hand is on God’s throne, as might happen as one is holding a religious object while taking an oath. This explanation is given by Rav Saadyah Gaon, and likely Onkelos as well. Alternatively, as posited in Sanhedrin 20b, it could be indicating that the command to obliterate Amalek refers to an era when a king is leading a religious monarchy. Which explanation is correct is disputed by the classical commentaries, some proposing both possibilities.

**Dealing with lists**

In numerous places, the *trop* deals with the individual elements in a list of items.

Let us first give two examples that comport with what one might sense as the expected case. Numbers (30:6) and Exodus (6:3) given below are representative.

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\(^2\) The book of Esther has particularly long *pesukim*, providing the most involved examples.

\(^3\) A detailed recursive algorithm and an example is available here.

\(^4\) These alternatives would be clearer if there was a י before Hashem.
The first example divides the segment on the word פסוק - if the father objects on the day when he first hears. The second segment then lists two types of restrictions:

1. vows; and
2. self-imposed restrictions.

The second example divides the segment first on the word וגו and then on the word הארץ. God declares he appeared, and then lists the three people to whom He appeared. In both examples, the action applies to all items on the list.

The next example from Numbers (30:3) contains a similar pattern but in reverse, with the list occurring first.

The segment divides on the word מנה, with the first part listing vows and restrictions and the second half admonishing the listener not to profane them.

In the following three examples, only certain elements of the list link to the verb in the opening phrase.

1. Numbers (6:14): כל בני-ישראל וה承德וות את-צויה לילה וنهار ארבעה
2. Exodus (1:6): והכן כל- giי חק-יה
3. Exodus (1:14): וInvokerת בֶּלַע וְיָשַׁר בֶּלַע הנַפְשָׁה

In each case, one can assume the verb applies to all elements of the list, despite being syntactically linked only to the first element. In Numbers (6:14) the opening phrase presumably applies to the two other elements in the list, even the element occurring in the next segment, after the etnahta. The pasuk may be read as if the phrase is implicitly assumed to be repeated.

The reasons for this syntactic choice may often be semantic or stylistic. In the second example above, it is highly plausible that the pasuk is ranking the people mentioned: Joseph is most important, followed by his brothers, and finally other members of his generation. There are many other examples, sometimes with a less compelling assumed ranking among list members. The last example may link to the most prevalent work performed. Many other examples that occur in the Torah are less clear.

Conclusions
The formality introduced is necessary to guide a beginner trying to parse a sentence following the rules associated with the trop.

Cotton Mather had much to say on how women should behave. In fact, he had much to say on many topics, writing 469 books over his 65 years. As historian Mark Noll has quipped, Mather “never had a thought he felt was unworthy of publication.” Mather’s fittingly titled Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, or, The Character and Happiness of a Vertuous Woman: in a Discourse Which Directs the Female-Sex how to Express, The Fear of God, in Every Age and State of their Life; and Obtain both Temporal and Eternal Blessedness, was published in Boston in 1692. In it, the popular Puritan minister, accomplished scientist, prolific author, owner of the largest private library in the colonies, grandson of Massachusetts Bay Colony spiritual leaders Richard Mather and John Cotton, and son of Harvard President Increase Mather, laid out his vision for womanhood. In his usage of biblical archetypes to describe the proper behavior of the ideal female (the very phrase “Daughters of Zion” is used in the Bible to connote Jerusalem and its inhabitants) including maids, wives, mothers, and widows, Mather demonstrated a particular affinity for a rather surprising biblical character. While in his later Magnalia Christi Americana (1702) Mather used the precedent of Nehemiah, the Persian Jew who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in the time of the Second Temple, to describe Massachusetts Bay Colony governor John Winthrop’s building the walls of New England (“our American Jerusalem”), here Mather found his prototype in the form of another Persian Jew, the

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6 Never one to spare words (in his Diary he admits “I am exceedingly sensible that the Grace of Meekness is very defective in me”), Mather later published subsequent works on women, including Elizabeth in Her Holy Retirement (1710) and Bethiah: The Glory which Adorns the Daughters of God (1722), a sequel to Ornaments. Mather’s visage, like his pen, was prolific. He was the first American whose portrait others bought and hung in their homes. See Rick Kennedy, The First American Evangelical: A Short Life of Cotton Mather (Grand Rapids, 2015), vi. Noll’s remark about Mather appears in his A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada (Grand Rapids, 1992), 86.

7 E.g., Zechariah 9:9 “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem.”

8 “She prudently avoids the reading of Romances, which do no less naturally than generally inspire the minds of young people.”

9 “She will therefore not be too much from home, upon concerns that perhaps to him are unaccountable; but if the angels do inquire, where she is, her Husband may reply, as once Abraham did, my wife is in the tent.”

10 “Tis possible, her Children may Sin; but this causes her presently to reflect upon the Errors of her own Heart and Life.”

11 “The Kindred of her Expired Husband are also still Welcome and Grateful to her, upon his account.”
beautiful and wise Queen Esther. Despite his characteristic verbal gymnastics, however, Mather’s attempt to fully appreciate Esther’s heroism falls short.

In Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, a conduct and virtue manual, Mather, New England’s most “intellectually and spiritually dynamic pastor” and the greatest North American scholar of his era, brings up Esther multiple times. The first is in praise of the women of his era, whose “beautiful countenance” does not preclude their “good understanding.” Such individuals follow in the ancient footsteps of biblical women including Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Esther, who possessed the same “benefits” of good looks and good insight and who simultaneously “feared God.” Mather then invokes Esther (juxtaposed to a reference to the Sotah ritual) as paradigmatic for women, who should demonstrate resolve and integrity in the face of suspicious husbands, refusing to upset the patriarchal order:

She will even Abstain from all appearance of Evil; and as 'tis abominable unto her to Entertain the least groundless and causeless Jealousie of her Husband... She affects to be an Esther, that is, A hidden One. But if a foolish and forward Husband will wrong her, with unjust suspicions of her Honesty, she will thence make a Devout Reflection upon her Disloyalty to God; but at the same time very patiently vindicate her Innocency to man; and the more patiently because the Water of Jealousie procures greater Blessings to those that have it Unrighteously and Abusively imposed upon them.

In a similar vein, in the same section, Mather again invokes Esther by taking the prototype one step further. Not only, as described above, does an “Esther” patiently and respectfully (as she is, after all, “a hidden one”) abjure suspecting husbands of any suspicions they might have regarding her behavior, Esther also models for women their ability to inspire proper behavior in, and even provide salvation for, their husbands.

Opportunities are those that a Woman has to bring over her Husband unto Real and Serious Godliness, and a Good Woman, will use those Opportunities. An Esther, a Witty Esther, what can’t she do with the most haughty Husband in the World?... If her Husband be a Carnal, Prayerless, Graceless man, she will not leave off her Ingenious Perswasions, till it may be said of him, Behold, he Prayes!... If her Husband be under the Power of any Temptation, she will do what she can to prevent his Destruction.”

Mather, of course, was much concerned with preventing societal destruction. He played an active role in the hysteria that emerged in and around Salem, Massachusetts after local women were accused by young girls of witchcraft. The fallout from these accusations, an episode that became known as the Salem Witch Trials, resulted in the executions of 14 women and 5 men in the same year Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion was published. Mather was a pillar of Puritan patriarchy. In Ornaments he even cites Ahasuerus’ decree in Esther 1:20 that “all the Wives give to their Husbands Honour both to Great and Small” as properly demonstrating the “reverence” a wife should have for her husband. As Harvard historian and scholar of early America Laurel Thatcher Ulrich notes, women were thought to play an invisible role in history, “because their bodies impel them to nurture. Their job is to bind the wounds, stir the soup, and bear the children of those whose mission it is to fight wars, rule nations, and define the cosmos.” As a contemporary of Mather put it in 1650 describing the unobtrusive, home-centered role women were expected to play, “Woman’s the center & lines are men.”

And yet, Mather saw in the biblical Esther a woman of independent action to be admired. As scholar of religion Ariel Clark Silver notes, Mather’s Esther is obedient while at the same time proactive. She is a “good conqueror” who obeys rules but is spiritually independent of her husband, providing him with salvation. Looking past figures in the Christian tradition including Mary, Mather offered his fellow Puritans a heroine from the Hebrew Bible who modeled a willingness to stay faithful unto death, overcome challenges and adversity, and provide

12 While composing Magnalia Christi, a history of the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony written in biblical style that described New England as a redemptive society, Mather took to wearing a skullcap and calling himself “rabbi.” At the same time, he was composing a textbook geared towards converting Jews to Christianity. See Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History (New York, 1989), 39-41. Louis H. Feldman argues that Josephus’ Jewish War was a particularly influential influence on both Mather and his father in their historical writings and that Cotton took “an extraordinary interest” in Josephus, considering him “a kindred personality, full of soul-searching and very defensive about his actions, very similar to Paul, whose friend, Mather claims, interestingly without evidence, Josephus was.” See Feldman, “The Influence of Josephus on Cotton Mather’s Biblia Americana: A Study in Ambiguity,” Shalom Goldman, ed. Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries (Hanover, 1993). Feldman describes Cotton Mather’s desire to convert Jews to Christianity as “very nearly an obsession for him.”

13 Kennedy, 86; Hertzberg, 27.

14 In the colonial era, obedience to one’s husband was both a religious and legal requirement and the husband represented the household to the outside world, though on occasions wives acted as “deputy husbands” giving instructions to workers, negotiating with Native Americans, and settling accounts. See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750 (New York, 1991).

15 The degree of involvement has been subject to much scholarly debate stemming from the work of Robert Calef, a contemporary of Mather’s whose decade-long negative portrayal of the latter, eventually published in a book, colors the modern popular perception (inspiring, for example, Mather appearing in Marvel Comics as a scowling villain wearing a green cape). Mather’s recent biographer Kennedy notes how Cotton did not support the push to swiftly execute the accused witches, and was a kindly figure who often visited prisons, hosted countless visitors, including a young Benjamin Franklin, in his vast study, and even housed some of the young women who claimed to be possessed by demons in his own home in an effort to cure them. Per Kennedy, Cotton never attended the trials, though he did preach at one of the executions, and wished to err on the side of leniency with the “witches.” “If Cotton’s advice had been followed [during the trials], it is safe to assume that matters in Salem would have turned out better” (63). In the words of Feldman, “Cotton Mather has had a bad press.”

16 Ulrich, Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History (New York, 2007), xxi. The title of Ulrich’s book stems from a phrase she coined in an article in a 1976 edition of American Quarterly that surveyed the literature about women in Mather’s era. The phrase was then tweaked (with “seldom” replaced by “rarely”) and popularized by journalist Kay Mills, who used it as an epigraph in her history of women in America From Pocahontas to Power Suits.
salvation for others. For his era, this emphasis on Esther - a figure from a story largely marginal to Christians - coupled with his very interest and concern for the inner spiritual lives of women, made Mather rather unique - one might say he was progressive in positioning Esther as a proto-feminist.17

Ornaments was not the last time Mather would meditate on Esther. His magnum opus, Biblia Americana, the first biblical commentary written in America, which ran a very Mather-ian 4,500 pages and which he worked on from 1693 until his death in 1728, recapplied the story and provided the scholarly interpretations current in Mather’s time. In it, Mather cites, among his many sources, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, Mekhilta, Pirkei de-Rabbis Eliezer, Zohar, Onkelos, Seder Olam Rabbah, Saadia Gaon, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Nahmanides, Moses of Coucy, Gersonides, Bahya ben Asher, Abravanel, and Seferno, remarking that “the writings of the rabbins [sic] are often very helpful to us.”18 In comments ranging from why Mordekhai did not bow down to Haman,19 to how the myrrh was utilized by the virgins in Ahasuerus’ harem,20 to how Esther could ask the Jews to fast for three days straight,21 to the “miraculous” timing of Haman’s arrival before Ahasuerus when the king was unable to sleep,22 to the custom of reacting to the mention of Haman’s name during the reading of the Megillah on Purim,23 Mather, as always, had much to say. Strikingly, however, very little centered on Esther herself. While Mordekhai and Ahasuerus’ actions and intentions are elaborated upon in Mather’s retelling (Mordekhai “exhorted [the Jews] unto Fasting, and Humiliation, and Repentance, & to follow the Example of the Ninivites,” and Ahasuerus, upon seeing Haman fall upon Esther’s bed, “turned every thing to the worst Sense, and made the Posture of his Petition but the Aggravation of his Crime”), Esther as an actor in her eponymous tale is a hidden one, meritling only the mention that “Her Beauty was extraordinary.”24

This interpretation of Esther and the legacy of her actions, however, misses the true significance of her story. When Esther is called upon by Mordekhai, it is not, as Mather offers in his Ornaments of the Daughters of Zion, to prevent the destruction of her husband, but to risk everything to provide salvation for her nation. And she does so despite the danger approaching her husband, to whom she is subject, presents.25 As Mordekhai states in his only recorded words in the entire Megillah:

Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis. (4:13-14)

Esther the Persian, who until this point hid her Jewish identity, is called upon to save her people as they stand on the precipice of destruction. She is to be Haddasah once more. As The New York Times ethicist Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, “identities work only because, once they get their grip on us, they command us, speaking to us as an inner voice; and because others, seeing who they think we are, call on us, too.”26 It is Mordekhai’s beseeching Esther to plead on behalf of her people (4:8), and the courage demonstrated by Esther in entering the king’s throne room unannounced and revealing her identity to Ahasuerus at her party, that lead to the salvation of the entire nation.27 Contra Cotton Mather’s reading, it is the destruction of Mordekhai and the Jewish people that Esther prevents, not that of her husband.

In 1912, two hundred and twenty years after Cotton Mather published Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion, thirty-eight Jewish women, led by fifty-two-year-old Henrietta Szold, gathered in Harlem, New York on Purim day.28 These women, sensing they were living in an historical era of Jewish national significance, gathered to found a new organization dedicated to promoting Zionism in America and improving the health and welfare of their brethren in Palestine. As political scientist Samuel Goldman has documented, staking a position rather unique among Christians of the time, Cotton Mather’s father, Increase Mather, “never wavered in his conviction that God’s promise to restore the Jews to their ancient homeland would one day be fulfilled.”29 With the flowering of the eventual State of Israel in sight, these women evoked the biblical figure whose dedication to her people inspired their own efforts in ensuring Jewish national survival. They, after some time, decided to name their organization Hadasah. In what can best be described as historical coincidence with a sprinkling of divine humor not unlike the events of Megillat

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17 See Ariel Clark Silver, The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration in American Literature (Lanham, 2018), 32-36.
18 Feldman, 143-144.
19 “It is not easy to find reason for Mordecai’s refusing to pay unto Haman the Respect which he required & exposing his whole Nation to an Extirpation…. Probably it was because Haman was the race of the Amalekites, and under the Curse denounced by God upon that Nation; and therefore, he thought it not proper to give that Honour unto him.”
20 “Myrrhe, from whence not only a Noble Oyl [oil] was drawn, but being beat unto a Powder, such a Fumigation was made with it.”
21 “Josephus understands it as only an Abstinence from Delicacies, and a Contentment with Hard & Coarse Fare.” For an analysis of Mather’s extensive usage of Josephus, see Feldman, 122-155.
22 “Haman should come in at the very Nick of Time, & so determine the Honour, and be made the Instrument of it [ch. 6]; This was from the Keeper of Israel, who never slumbers nor sleeps! [Psalms 121:4].”
23 “The Book of Esther is read in all their Synagogues: & when the Name of Haman occurs, they clap their Hands, and cry out, Let his memory perish.”
27 See Linda Day, Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther (Sheffield, 1995) for a discussion of how the Greek translations of Esther emphasize God’s historical relationship with the Jewish people in their telling of the story.
28 For more on Szold’s story see Pamela S. Nadell, America’s Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today (New York, 2019), Mishael Zion, Esther: A New Israeli Commentary (Jerusalem, 2019), 67.
29 God’s Country: Christian Zionism in America (Philadelphia, 2018), 14. Goldman notes that Cotton “initially echoed his father’s arguments about the salvation of all Israel, but eventually concluded that the Jews had no further part to play in God’s design.” (41)
Esther itself, the women had changed the organization’s name from what they had agreed upon that Purim day. The original name for Hadassah, the charitable women’s organization now 330,000 U.S. members strong? Daughters of Zion.
contain the two epidemics raging in Odessa – the Spanish flu and cholera.”30

In the early nineteenth century and in response to their own outbreaks of cholera, towns from Massachusetts to Kentucky had observed a public day of fasting and prayer “by designation of the civil authorities.”31 With no notion as to the cause of the illness, no way to prevent its spread, and no medications to alleviate the suffering, it is little wonder that the Jewish communities turned to folk medicine and married off poor orphans in a Black Wedding. For really, what else was there to do?

As we wait to see how far the current coronavirus outbreak spreads before it eventually sputters out (for, like all other infectious diseases, from cholera to plague, it surely will), we should pause and reflect on our good fortune. We now understand the etiology and can often conquer those diseases that were mysterious and life-threatening to our great-grandparents. Vaccines, public-health interventions, and antimicrobial drugs generally keep us safe. And, in the face of an epidemic, we no longer need to gather at the local cemetery to marry off a destitute couple and invoke God’s mercy.

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30 Odesskiye Novosti, October 2, 1918.
31 The American Quarterly Register, November 1832. Vol. 5(2), 97.